The anti-social network: Facebook has negative implications on the friendships of young adults

Stream: Social Networks

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Abstract

This essay explores the negative impact that Facebook has had on the relationships that young adults share with friends and colleagues. Examining such scholarly resources as Kaliarna (2016) to classify online relationships, Young (2013) to study adult friendships in the Facebook era and Bevan, Pfyl and Barclay (2012) to highlight the ramifications of Facebook friend deletion, I will highlight the characteristics of friendship and how they compare when applied to online and offline environments. This will factor in the concept of the online persona as a key component of Facebook use, as well as identify issues young adults face such as identity construction and depression.

Keywords: social media, Facebook, friendships, depression, online

Known universally as the social network, Facebook has become a fixture in the everyday lives of a large portion of the world population and is a medium for much of their social activity. While it has been proposed in academic circles and media outlets that Facebook has been a positive facilitator in both maintaining existing friendships and creating new ties, I contend that it is an agent in eroding the quality of those relationships. For young adults, friendships are of critical importance as they are intrinsic in helping one negotiate a stage of life where self-

discovery is most prevalent, and they aid in providing key emotional support and a sense of self-worth (Best, Taylor and Manktelow, 2015). Firstly, I will discuss factors that lead to problematic scenarios including comparisons between offline and online relationships, friendship deletion and miscommunication. I will then cover the link between depression and Facebook relationships and psychological behaviours such as indirect posting and bullying. This will be followed by the impact of Facebook has had on friendships through identity construction and online persona.

Friendship can be defined as a mutual union of trust and emotional fulfillment between two people (Young, 2013) and exists in many forms and in varying degrees of strength. As a social networking site, Facebook has provided unprecedented opportunities for people to experience social fulfillment and make new connections, which are facilitated efficiently via content that is of mutual interest to multiple parties. Along with email provisions, people engage with their peers by uploading dialogue regarding their lives, media such as photos or video, and content such as links to news reports relating to personal interest. Facebook has proven to be gratifying and enjoyable in both maintaining existing friendships, building closer relationships with acquaintances and acquiring new relationships. People now comport their relationships on Facebook more readily than any other scenario and it has evolved so far beyond its original intended purpose to connect people, it has become a social custom (Bevan, Pfyl and Barclay, 2012). Despite this, some authors have questioned the value and depth of online friendships, and whether they are comparatively significant to those that exist offline (Best, Taylor and Manktelow, 2015).

The foundation of a meaningful friendship is built on good and bad experiences that occur offline, and the lessons and growth gained from these (Froding and Peterson, 2012). As the reliance on Facebook for social discourse increases, there are concerns that some are settling for friendships of a lower quality and superficial nature, and have adopted a philosophy that interaction with other's posts is an adequate substitute for verbal communication (Sharp, 2012). Whilst it is common for an individual to develop a close relationship with another person or a friendship group on Facebook, they are more likely to form weaker ties with larger amounts of people as it can allow one to interact conveniently without the time constraints involved in offline friendships. Facebook presents a daily newsreel of the lives of friends both through

status updates and photographic representations. Due to these regular updates, people feel as they can stay abreast of the what occurs in the lives of their friends, and therefore may not make the effort to socialise as often (Thompson, 2018). One or both parties may develop a perception that the quality of the friendship has diminished due to complacency.

Whilst Facebook can erode friendships over time, the provision and practice of deleting friends is a decisive action that can cause irreparable damage. Whilst some may do so out of feeling as though they have too many weak ties or non-essential acquaintances, some have reasoned that they do so as the result of disliking the content produced by their friends, their online persona or that the quality of their friendships offline are diminishing (Young, 2013). Any form of disagreement that occurs on Facebook may inspire an impulsive decision to delete another person from their list of friends as a means of punishment or revenge. The fact that this can be performed at the couple of clicks of a button before any mediation can take place means dissent can escalate rapidly. It is a damning example of how Facebook plays a hand in the dissolution of a relationship before there is an opportunity for the two parties to attempt to resolve the issues in an offline setting (Bevan, Pfyl and Barclay, 2012). Whilst friendship deletion on Facebook may not be viewed with the same level of severity as the termination of an offline relationship, it does carry with it many of the same characteristics that cause feelings of rejection and despondency. Facebook is problematic to friendship groups in this scenario, especially when friend's lists are visible on a profile, as an individual may observe the other party in a mutual friend's lists after the fact, which could in turn place a strain on other friendships (Young, 2013). The fallout from the ending of a friendship means that emotion can take over, and with the tools to distribute communication quickly and to a wide audience at one's disposal, a fixable disagreement can spiral out of control. One could well use this platform to publicly humiliate somebody, spread rumours and outright lies very quickly, and try to turn their entire friendship base against them (Chapin, 2014). Conflict on Facebook instigates a slippery slope in the downfall of friendships, and whilst these may be solved in a civil manner in some cases, the potential for escalation is evident. This could enter into the territory of cyber-bullying, which has been proven to have extreme effects on mental health and wellbeing, in some cases leading to drug use and suicide (Chapin, 2014).

Consequently, this raises another concern about reliance on Facebook to experience and sustain friendships at the expense of other methods exposes issues that only physical and verbal interaction can quash. Depression is commonly experienced by young adults and can easily isolate and alienate the sufferer from other people, even from family members and those with whom they share close ties (Steers, Wickham and Acitelli, 2014). One of the distinctions of the of Facebook is that individuals are more readily exposed to the lives of their friends and are constantly privy to visual updates such as photographs that they would otherwise only experience in a face-to-face situation. If one were to consider a scenario where an individual is suffering from depressive symptoms, a lack of self-worth and perceived shortcomings in their own life loom large. Accessing Facebook, they would immediately be confronted with a barrage of information regarding others that they cannot anticipate seeing (Steers, Wickham and Acitelli, 2014). This might lead them to indulge in social comparison, where they will measure the content of friend's lives against their own (Steers, Wickham and Acitelli, 2014). This has proven to exacerbate a depressive state if one feels inept and hard done by when compared to their friends, which may well lead to feelings of resentment (Nesi and Prinstein, 2015). This, along with any perceptions of a lack of popularity amongst their peers can be perpetuated through Facebook, and any feelings of exclusion are a detriment to one's well-being (Best, Taylor and Manktelow, 2015). Unlike offline environments, social calendars are visible to online friends and documentation of a social gathering which is publicly visible may well subject an individual who was not included in the plans to feelings of exclusion which will heighten negative emotions (Young, 2013).

Like many online platforms, Facebook represents a safe space for individuals to interact, which means one is more inclined to be transparent about their feelings and emotions. Whilst honesty is considered an important element of friendship, expressing this on Facebook can be the catalyst of further emotional stress. People who openly disclose depressive or negative emotions on Facebook do so with the intent to garner the support of friends (Landauer, 2014). Indeed, an unconditional agreement of friendship is that one should be able to rely upon another for support and understanding in troubled times (boyd, 2006). If they do not receive the support they seek from such actions, the individual is likely to suffer from feelings of isolation, especially if they notice their friends providing support for other people (Park et al, 2016). One may have many friends who are easily accessible and social support for depression should be

simpler, therefore the expectations of these friends in this scenario are higher. If friends don't reciprocate in a satisfactory fashion, it can magnify perceived feelings of a lack of support. This is problematic for people who experience feelings of loneliness and have a perception that they have a lack of offline relationships are more inclined to compensate by dedicating themselves to connecting with others online (Skues, Williams and Wise, 2012).

Facebook has provided new opportunities for people to exercise psychological behaviours designed to cause distress to others using subtle methods that often border on the passive-aggressive. One phenomenon which has arisen since Facebook's inception is the act of ghosting, which can be defined as a lack of interaction with a person when compared to others, leaving them in a position where their s not acknowledged (Freedman, Powell, Le and Williams, 2018). A similar method used is ostracism, and whilst this shares similar traits to ghosting, it is a case of keeping one in their life but purposefully not including them in social scenarios and online interaction, which can cause severe emotional distress (Freedman, Powell, Le and Williams, 2018). People have reported that a lack of response to their posts and general interaction from friends on Facebook have led them to question the importance of their relationships and expressed difficulty in knowing how to confront them regarding the issue (Fox and Moreland, 2015). Another device used is vague booking, which can be aimed at an individual by somebody posting dialogue which is structured in a manner which does not address anybody directly (Child and Starcher, 2016). This is often a means of criticising friends without being confrontational, and several people may be roped into thinking that it refers to them, potentially affecting several people simultaneously. A significant characteristic of online communication is that it lacks a narrative tone and visual cues that would be more discernible to our understanding in an offline scenario (Keil and Johnson, 2002). Ergo a post from a friend from either their Facebook page or a comment on another page may be susceptible to being taken out of context, increasing animosity and potentially providing accelerant to an argument that may otherwise never occur.

A vital component of any friendship is trust, and this is fostered by copious interaction, shared experiences and mutual bonds. When people present themselves on Facebook, they often construct an identity that can be an idealistic side of themselves that they wish the world to see (Kaliarnta, 2016). Young adults especially are in a phase of self-discovery during this

tenure of their life and can fall into a habit of constructing an identity online that may not necessarily be an accurate depiction of them as a person or tell the whole story (Kaliarnta, 2016). When considering a scenario where somebody established a friendship offline to the extent that they become familiar with elements of their personality, witnessing an online version of the same person may skew how they view their relationship, and the trust component can suffer. They may also witness their friend giving an account of events or information on Facebook that they know for a fact are untrue or altered (McFall, 2012) which can lead to questions of the nature of the friendships online if they do not truly know or trust the person (Kaliarnta, 2016). One may also find that the friends they thought they knew so well possessed traits and characteristics stemming from their online persona which may not have been recognised in previous encounters (Skues, Williams and Wise, 2012). Narcissism and even arrogance displayed by friends can also stem from a need for people to present themselves in a positive light and disclose the illusion of a perfect existence (Horvath and Morf, 2010). They may also have struck up a friendship with somebody from a social circle, only to find upon connecting on Facebook, they openly displayed political views and stances that contravenes their own and the difference in opinion renders the friendship untenable (Kaliarnta, 2016). This shows that Facebook can reveal that people may not only know enough about those they considered their friends but also discover parts of their personality that only became apparent online.

Through these examples, no matter how entrenched Facebook becomes in the everyday lives of us all, it is not a healthy substitute for connecting with friends offline. Online communication continues to possess a level of ambiguity and complexity that cannot be eradicated, meaning that friendships are stronger when communication is conducted person to person. Unrest between friends has the potential to escalate very quickly with the implications not considered, and the psychological tactics with which people can use on Facebook combined with other web platforms enables this. Individuals suffering from depression would be better served without constant Facebook use, as it can act as a deterrent from the emotional and psychological help they may need. Perhaps most troubling of all though is that one cannot be sure that the people they consider their friends are accurate versions of themselves on Facebook, and one is depriving themselves of rewarding experiences with others if they restricted themselves to online interaction. There are limitations on prior research focusing

solely on the problematic elements discussed here and further analysis on young adults is needed.

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